



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 11 | Issue 2

Article 15

Sep-2009

Book Review: Re-defining Feminisms

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Recommended Citation

Nachescu, Voichita (2009). Book Review: Re-defining Feminisms. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11(2), 218-221.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol11/iss2/15>

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Re-defining Feminisms. 2008. Ranjana Harish and V. Bharathi Harishankar (eds.) Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications. 278 pp. Includes illustrations, tables, and index. \$14.00 (Hardcover).

Reviewed by Voichita Nachescu¹

Re-defining Feminisms is a collection of essays that attempts to re-situate feminism in the Indian context. The volume collects papers originally presented at the National Conference hosted by the English Department of Gujarat University in 2005, as well as several invited contributions. The main purpose of the book is to offer a space for debate to contemporary Indian feminists, maintaining an explicitly stated emphasis on the plurality of feminist orientations in order to allow for fluidity and inclusion. The articles published in this interdisciplinary collection include approaches ranging from literary criticism and theater studies to history, media studies, legal studies, and religious studies.

The process of re-defining feminism in the Indian context proceeds, according to the editors, through several stages: Re-design, Re-think, Re-view and Re-mark, each spelled with a hyphen, as in the title of the book. The hyphen seems to be used in order to underscore a certain insistence on the transformative process that inflects feminist ideas, arguably of a Western genealogy, in their travels through the transnational space. These four stages also represent the subchapter headings under which the articles that form the collection are grouped together. While the contributors to this edited volume mainly speak from within the Indian university, activists and writers supplement their ranks and enrich the academic perspectives with personal and activist accounts. The resulting volume is rather heterogeneous, including a variety of contributions that cover feminist perspectives on Indian history, reports on the work of contemporary activist groups, contemporary cultural criticism, and personal narratives. Many of the pieces anthologized are situated at the intersection of gender, class, and caste, allowing for a multiplicity of perspectives and underscoring the fact that for Indian feminists, just like for feminists elsewhere, differences among women are crucial. Overall, the book makes a pleasant and informative read and the multiple perspectives included in the book offer a rich and detailed picture of contemporary Indian feminisms.

For those who expect contemporary Indian feminism to be marked by postcolonial theory as it is currently studied in the United States, there are very few contributions that explicitly engage with it. From the very beginning of the book, the context is assumed to be “postmodern, poststructuralist, postcolonial and postfeminist,” yet there are few explanations that might detail further the consequences of such an unquestioned acceptance of these terms. Refusing an explicit analysis of the prefix “post-“, the editors of the volume state that they prefer to use the space opened by these multiple conditions to transform contemporary feminisms and resituate them within Indian circumstances. This announces a certain lack of specificity regarding the theoretical commitments of the volume, which, when coupled with the emphasis on redefinition, and added to the reiterated stress on feminisms in the plural, sometimes gives the impression of a certain hesitation to define, or even re-define, feminism. There are many ways of redefining feminism, both the authors and editors seem to implicitly

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assume, thus the reader is sometimes left wondering whether more specific explanations of feminism might not be in order for this re-definition of feminism to actually take place. Contemporary Indian feminism, just like feminism in the United States, seems to consist of a proliferation of perspectives and definitions and not necessarily a coherent program.

One of the strongest attributes of the articles presented in this book is their insistence on working at the intersection of gender, caste and class, and, in the case of Shilpa Das's article, ability. In "Invisible Women: Disability, Gender, and Feminism," Das discusses the multiple oppressions encountered by Indian women with disabilities, oppressions that are intensified by poverty, belonging to a lower caste, and living in a rural environment. Overall, Das finds that women with disabilities are surrounded by a "culture of silence," as their families try to keep them out of the public eye due to a fear of being stigmatized. This contributes to their further marginalization and diminishes even more their access to resources.

A similar "culture of silence," according to AWAG (the Ahmedabad Women's Action Group), surrounds the issue of domestic violence, which often results in "accidental deaths" for women (women's deaths as result of domestic violence, yet recorded as "accidental deaths" by the police). After a study of police reports, AWAG decided to intervene by training social support agencies to recognize domestic violence cases and offer the victims a supportive atmosphere. Ila Pathak, who authors the contribution, argues that the ability to file a legal complaint accusing their husbands of domestic violence has contributed to the decrease, over the years, in the number of women's "accidental deaths." Although police actions to protect women are usually symbolic, Pathak claims that there may also be social pressures at work that are slowly changing prevailing attitudes toward domestic violence and making it less acceptable.

Vibhuti Patel discusses another concern of the Indian women's movement, namely sexual harassment in the workplace. In spite of the existence of a 2004 law against sexual harassment in the workplace, this law is still rarely applied and many myths that disregard the effect of sexual harassment on women still persist. Patel, founder of the Women's Development Cell at the University of Mumbai, a women's organization founded with the purpose of eliminating sexual harassment and empowering women, concludes her article with a report on the actions taken by the University of Mumbai in order to implement much-needed policies against sexual harassment.

These reports on contemporary feminist activism within and outside of the university are complemented by personal stories of Indian feminist writers and artists. The present reviewer tremendously enjoyed reading some of the personal stories shared by contemporary Indian feminists, who interweave anecdotes, theoretical reflections, and narratives of activism in their contributions. Such is the story of Vidya Bal, feminist and journalist, who explicitly announces her lifelong commitment to feminism and narrates various stages in her feminist life, from realizing that her problems as a woman were not unique—a classical consciousness-raising process—to organizing against domestic violence and finally understanding feminism as a way of life. Similarly illuminating is the story of Lakshmi Kannan, Tamil novelist and poet, who narrates several comical incidents that put the sexism of her male contemporaries in sharp relief. While she was on a writing fellowship at the University of Kent, two male compatriots she had met on campus expected her to cook meals for them and invite them to dinner parties!

For Indian feminists, just like for feminists elsewhere, the critique of sexism goes hand in hand with the affirmation of women's creativity and the search for foremothers. Some of the most interesting contributions in this collection revisit Indian women's writing from a feminist perspective, using Elaine Showalter's theory of gynocriticism and her three-phase model of Western women's writing. In "Courage to Never Submit or Yield," G. S. Jayashree develops a four-phase model for Indian women's writing, from a submission phase in which women writers usually produced traditional poetic forms, sometimes recorded in writing, sometimes not, to a progressive phase, in which women writers were engaged in the struggle for independence, a regressive phase, governed by women's disillusion with post-independence India, and an assertive phase, which emerged in the 1980s and characterizes contemporary writers. Showalter's gynocriticism also inspires Darshana Trivedi's reinterpretation of the works of the nineteenth-century female poet Gangasati. Gangasati was a Bhakti poet, part of a literary movement that created poetry in local, colloquial languages instead of Sanskrit, a movement in which women played a prominent role. Gangasati's oeuvre consists in a series of poems addressed to her daughter-in-law, celebrating women's empowerment through knowledge. According to Trivedi, the bond that the two women shared also represented a rare example of female mutual empowerment under a patriarchal society intent on discouraging such bonds.

The redefinition of feminism in the Indian context also includes a revisionist approach to history. Vanjayati D. Shete attempts to explore the role of women in various historical periods by analyzing medieval representations of women in temples. The parallel analysis of both temple sculptures and historical records allows the author to identify a multitude of roles played by women as fighters and sculptors, or engaged in alchemical and healing practices. Other historical essays from this collection focus on nineteenth-century history and the debate regarding women's access to education and the public sphere, a crucial debate situated at the heart of Indian disputes regarding modernity, colonialism, and nationalism. In her essay regarding the "woman question" in nineteenth-century India, Balaji Ranganathan points out that apart from the significant difference played by having access to education, the lives of British women living in the colonies were still governed by patriarchal constraints, and domesticity, rather than education, was viewed as the proper focus of a British woman's life. Focusing on Indian women writers, who in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century courageously demanded an education, assumed writing careers, and became public personae, Sachidananda Mohanty argues that the mere act of literary and creative writing was a deeply political act for these writers. They routinely invoked the name of Shakti, the Indian archetypal image for female power and creativity, in an attempt to reconcile modern aspirations and traditional expectations.

The articles focusing on contemporary cultural issues underscore the fact that patriarchal perceptions are still dominant in the discourse of literary criticism with regard to women writers. Javed Khan presents an overview of the works of Kamal Das, a contemporary poet whose confessional poetry on love and sexuality gave her the aura of a feminist rebel in the eyes of her critics. The same debate regarding the relationship between women and the public sphere informs the study of Tamil theater penned by A. Mangai, Tamil theater activist. Mangai's gender analysis of Tamil theater looks at practices of theatrical performance and studies various genres that prescribe or preclude

the presence of women on stage. Modern female playwrights have, however, resisted such constraints and attempted to redefine various theatrical traditions on their own. In “Staging Resistance,” Kavita Patel studies the works of a group of contemporary female playwrights, who, as Patel argues, put women’s emancipation at the core of the dramatic conflicts in their plays. Patel quotes from one of these plays, a feminist rewriting of Sita’s song, by C. S. Lakshmi (243):

Because of love,
Lust and politics
I am Sita, the pawn,
I am Sita, the cheated
I am Sita
Who has
Nothing.

Does this collection achieve its arguably ambitious purpose, to re-define feminism in the Indian context? It definitely becomes clear throughout the volume that Indian feminists read the canon of Western feminism both selectively and critically, and, in the end, adapt concepts and theories with a pragmatic eye that evaluates their relevance for the contemporary needs of Indian women. For American scholars of global feminism, this book could be a very instructive read, and, as most of the papers published in this collection are written in an accessible style, they are very appropriate for classroom use. Women’s Studies courses on global and transnational feminism would very much benefit from using primary materials such as the texts collected in this volume.

Yet to a certain extent these texts seem to engage critically Western feminisms more than they engage each other. The volume is interdisciplinary and presents a diversity of voices, a multitude of perspectives that sometimes seem to coexist side by side rather than speak to each other. Herein lies both the main strength and weakness of the book: the collection forms a generous ensemble of interdisciplinary readings yet we fail to grasp the contemporary debates, criticisms, and disagreements *within* contemporary Indian feminism.